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SUBJECT: PATRIOTS AND PUNDITS SOUND OFF VIA BLOGS

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11. (SBU) Summary: As the number of Vietnamese with access to the Internet skyrockets, personal weblogs (blogs) have rapidly become an increasingly widespread alternative public news source. Blogs go well beyond even the feistiest print and electronic media, airing unprecedented criticism of the Government of Vietnam's (GVN) performance. Not only do blogs serve as a rallying point for reformers and dissident political groups pushing for reform, they also appeal to a broad, well educated and influential main stream audience. One of the most surprising aspects of the political blog movement is that relatively few bloggers have suffered serious repercussions for their work even though publication of the same sentiments in the Vietnamese press remains unthinkable. While some of the more daring blogs, such as those that openly challenge the Communist Party's leadership role, have prompted the GVN and National Assembly to consider measures to regulate blogs, the blogs also have a number of influential followers who agree that little can be done to turn back the clock now. End summary.

Blog Explosion 2007

12. (U) Almost unheard of just a few years ago, blogs moved into Vietnam's social and political mainstream in 2007, with both domestic media and GVN agencies estimating that there were 3 million Vietnamese bloggers online by the end of 2007. The blog explosion began in late 2006 after the introduction of "Yahoo 360" allowed millions of Vietnamese users of Yahoo mail to set up free blogs and turn their existing Yahoo contacts into blog "friends" with a few key clicks. Not all blogs are public; bloggers can choose either to open their blog up to anyone surfing the net or limit it to only to those people in their friends list. In addition to Yahoo 360, many Vietnamese also use other free blog hosting sites such as Google's Blogspot. Still others keep blogs on systems sponsored by domestic providers such as "Yobanbe" (colloquial equivalent of Friendster) and "Timhanh" (Fast Search). Local experts predict Vietnamese users will continue to increase their use of community networks like Mash, Facebook and Friendster since the Internet backbone capacity in Vietnam "doubles every six months," according to a prominent online news contact. With Vietnam's international connectivity set to expand as well, access to blogs continues to mushroom.

Beginning Of Civic Journalism?

13. (SBU) Blogging is not just for amateurs. Prominent reporters and editors of at least six national newspapers write very popular blogs, some of which boast over 600,000 "page views" ("page views" count visits more accurately than "hits") after

being posted only a few months. For many bloggers, blog entries appear to serve as alternate news and information sources on a variety of topics, including new laws and policies, crime reports, major scandals and criticism of GVN performance. Reflecting an attitude that we believe is typical of many political bloggers, one prominent journalist/blogger told the CG that he posts information on his blog that he believes would be censored out of his newspaper.

14. (SBU) Blogs can energize the public in ways that the GVN condones as well as in ways it does not. In late September 2007, for example, blogs were flooded with entries with the latest information and calls for donations after a major bridge construction accident in the Mekong Delta left 54 people dead. In addition to organizing assistance, however, many bloggers also questioned the authorities' management of the crisis and tried to pinpoint responsibility for the disaster.

15. (SBU) In Vietnam today, bloggers continue to push boundaries almost daily, including by engaging in unprecedented finger-pointing at the country's ruling elite. In April 2007, for example, a popular music composer called on the Deputy Prime Minister (DPM)/Education Minister Nguyen Thien Nhan to resign after a public outcry over what was perceived as the overly harsh treatment of a twelve-year-old primary school pupil who was accused of theft. Other bloggers jumped into the fray when Nhan proved to be rather thin-skinned in response to a published article criticizing new school fees introduced by the DPM. Bloggers have even targeted State President Nguyen Minh Triet, heaping on criticism after Triet reportedly pressured newspapers to print his letter to students on the occasion of the new school year. Yet other blogs have carried their campaign straight to security services via a series of stories about the glamorously opulent lifestyle of the Hanoi Ministry of Public Security's (MPS) director's son -- stories that include information on the car he drives, the restaurants he frequents and the girls he dates.

16. (SBU) Blogs played a major role in stirring up Vietnamese

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public opinion over China's late 2007 decision to establish a nominal administrative unit in the disputed Spratly and Paracel islands. In what eventually snowballed into a series of public protests, bloggers wrapped themselves in the Vietnamese flag and browbeat their own government for not "standing up to" the Chinese. Among the more memorable blog entries generated by the Spratly and Paracels dispute was a piece by the Deputy Editor-in-Chief of a popular HCMC-based newspaper in which he not only recalled, for the first time in 30 years, the 1974 battle waged by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) navy against the Chinese in the Paracels (reftel), but also went on to laud the South Vietnamese naval officers as "defenders of the motherland." Another blogger commenting on the same events decried the perceived timidity of the official GVN response to the Chinese moves, writing that MFA spokesman Le Dung conveyed the voice of GVN regarding its claim of sovereignty over the islands but never conveyed the voice of the people.

A Rallying Point For Reforms...

17. (SBU) Reform-minded Vietnamese -- including some political leaders -- use blogs to voice their ideas on how reforms should move ahead in Vietnam. In his blog, outspoken National Assembly member Duong Trung Quoc publicized his strong views on reforming National Assembly sessions in order for the parliament to discuss constituents' issues "in depth" and spend more time focusing on "the country's important issues." Le Cong Dinh, a pro-democracy lawyer in the HCMC Bar Association, told us that his group of pro-reform young lawyers routinely uses blogs to exchange information, engaging in discussions of such politically taboo subjects as constitutional reform and the establishment of a constitutional court.

... And Also For Political Dissent

¶8. (SBU) A sizable and tech-savvy new generation of dissidents is also using blogs as a primary means of communication. On January 19, in spite of the GVN's official discouragement, an anti-China protest focusing on human rights and the Olympics broke out in downtown HCMC. Despite being dispersed after just 20 minutes with several participants detained for questioning, photos and articles about the protest immediately appeared in blogs that reach a world-wide audience. Pictures and entries about previous anti-China demonstrations also flooded the blog community. In much the same way that the spread of e-mail and mobile phone usage improved communications between dissidents in the past by allowing them to bypass easily monitored phone lines, blogs are now being used to bypass the censorship that limits traditional media outlets. While some public blogs attract staggering numbers of readers, some dissidents' choose to keep all or part of their blogs "private" by limiting access to their list of contacts -- in effect creating a virtual dissident community network.

¶9. (SBU) There is no question that bloggers are moving into forbidden territory. Blogger and computer engineer Nguyen Tien Trung openly advertises his membership in the banned Democratic Party of Vietnam (DPV) and brazenly criticizes the GVN in his personal blog which has become a virtual meeting place for members of Viet Youth for Democracy and the DPV. "Ykienblog.wordpress.com" (Opinionblog), initially a personal weblog that carried pro-democracy articles and updates on the dissident community, has now become a forum for other Vietnamese users to express their views. In her well-publicized blog, award-winning movie director Song Chi questioned the rationale of Article 4 in Vietnam's Constitution -- the article which gives the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) supreme leadership over the government. While three members of the dissident People's Democratic Party were sentenced to jail in 2007 for "propagandizing against the government" for advocating the abolition of Article 4, Chi remains free.

Blog Control--Mission Impossible?

¶10. (SBU) Not all of the blog activity in Vietnam has been of a socially responsible or civic-minded nature. In late 2007, a popular singer in HCMC sued a reporter for a city "security" newspaper for slander after the reporter published an entry full of negative comments regarding the singer's latest show on her blog. Fallout over the personal attacks on the singer even led the newspaper to distance itself from the reporter. Not surprisingly, authorities have also uncovered several pornographic blogs as well as blogs used as a point of contact for prostitution. Harsh blog entries criticizing Nguyen Cong Khe, the Editor in Chief of one of Vietnam's leading pro-reform dailies, for his close ties to HCMC Party Secretary Hai and President Triet appear to have turned this otherwise pro-reform figure into a leading anti-blog advocate who has personally

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lobbied the GVN to step up controls on bloggers. Khe is among those pushing the Ministry of Information and Communication to speed up drafting a government regulation on blog control. To date, it's unclear what the regulation will entail and when it will come into effect.

¶11. (SBU) In a September 2007 media interview, Deputy Minister of Information and Communication Do Quy Doan asserted that a blog is a "double-edged knife" and that blog regulation needs to have a "preventative effect." Leaving the specifics to law drafting experts, Mr. Doan suggested that bloggers must not publish, among other things, "information against the country [that] divides national unity and infringes upon the dignity and credibility of individuals and organizations." While Doan emphasized that blog regulation would not be in the form of administrative control but would instead serve as a "facilitator for blog development," the phrases he used are taken almost verbatim from the laws most frequently used to convict political dissidents. While members of the blog community as well as their supporters continue to argue against any attempt to

control blogs, they also contend that such efforts are as impractical as they are misdirected since regulating blogs -- the majority of which are hosted on overseas servers -- would be nearly impossible.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) The fact that many bloggers are now posting exactly the same things that dissidents went to jail for saying in public over the past few years shows the role that the Internet is playing in pushing the envelope on freedom of speech and the domestic political debate. Rather than attempting to hide their identities, the bloggers cited by name in this report proudly sign their blogs and often even post their photos on the main page. The fact that so many of these politically-charged blogs are in the "public sphere" (meaning anyone can find and read them on the Internet) also shows that many bloggers are battling the system in a surprisingly open manner. It will be interesting to see how the GVN tries to handle this "double-edged knife." Intimidation of individual bloggers has been attempted, but to little effect. Critics say point-of-access control would not work, since previous GVN attempts to force internet cafes to register user IDs and store data have not been effectively enforced. The possibility of a Chinese-style wholesale clampdown on blogs is also unlikely, given the propensity for a huge public outcry as well as recognition within other parts of the national leadership that Vietnam needs the type of rapid technological advancement that is almost impossible without a functioning Internet. While the road ahead for bloggers will almost certainly be quite bumpy and at times dangerous, we believe that pioneers of the Vietnamese blogosphere have technology and time on their side. End comment.

¶13. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.
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